# The Peerless President

*THE PRESIDENCY IN FLUX. By George E. Reedy. Columbia. 133 pp. $5.95*

By DAVID S. BRODER

IT HAS BEEN three years now since George Reedy, who was Lyndon B. Johnson's press secretary, published his extraordinary book, *Twilight of the Presidency.* It was extraordinary because Reedy —a top newspaperman for years before he became the press buffer for the Senate majority leader, vice president and President—had the discipline to write an "insider's" book about the contemporary White House that was singularly free of bitterness, self-justification or cant.

In that volume—whose shrewdness and sensibility stand up under frequent rereading—Reedy argued that the presidency was in trouble, and out of control, because it had escaped the bounds of constitutionalism and become an institution of royalty within our democracy. He returns to that subject—the crisis of the presidency—in the three lectures at Columbia University that comprise the substance of this new book, *The Presidency in Flux.* Delivered in the fall of 1971, they are published here in full, along with some useful question-and-answer exchanges with his audience. The volume concludes with an essay, written a year later, on a somewhat different topic—the sociological changes underlying the "new politics"—to complete a manuscript that is just barely long enough for a book.

The merit of this new book, however, should not be measured by its length. Reedy has some fresh points to make about the presidency, and they are points of utmost pertinency today.

Consider, for example, this passage, in which Reedy outlines the "chain of circumstances" that he believes is crippling the modern presidency: "Power breeds isolation. Isolation leads to the capricious use of power. In turn, the capricious use of power breaks down the normal channels of communication between the leader and the people whom he leads. This ultimately means the deterioration of power and with it the capacity to sustain unity in our society." Do those words—uttered in 1971 by a man who was an eyewitness to the political destruction of Lyndon Johnson—seem inappropriate today?

The lectures in this book emphasize two or three points that were given less analysis in Reedy's earlier study. He is concerned about the substitution of mass public relations techniques for the face-to-face dialogue that characterized the old politics, even the bad old politics of the big city machines. He is worried whether any system of accommodation politics can moderate the conflicts of values between the dispossessed intellectuals of the New Left and the work-ethic traditionalists of the New Majority.

He has sensible observations to make on all these questions, but chiefly he is worried, still, about keeping the presidency in balance. The "heart of the problem," Reedy says, is that American politicians "need to engage in adversary debate with equals or their sensitivity deteriorates." But "the President cannot have [that] kind of adversary relationship with other people" because "everyone around him is his subordinate."

The search for peers who can keep the President's political instincts alive by forcing him to communicate, one-on-one, leads Reedy inevitably to consideration of two other pyramids of power—Congress and the press.

He finds Congress heartening—particularly because it has shown some tendency to challenge the President in the area of foreign policy, which is where most presidents invest most of their energy and thought. Even when Congress is wrong in a particular foreign policy challange, Reedy says, we ought to be cheering on the challengers for forcing the President to deal with them as near-equals in the power struggle
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DAVID S. BRODER, a political writer for The Washington Post, won the 1972 Pulitzer Prize for Distinguished Commentary.